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ABSTRACT

The works assigned to a university course in the Harlem Renaissance (HR) are discussed. The HR is defined as a controversial collocation of cultural and aesthetic phenomena. The point is made that the historical backgrounds for the period from Reconstruction to the end of World War I was characterized by many changes which strongly affected black people. These changes had an effect on the works of the HR. The works of both white and Negro writers are reviewed. (CK)

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The Harlem Renaissance Today (The 1920's "New Negro Movement" Reviewed) — Notes on a Neglected Theme

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"The Harlem Renaissance," that complex congeries of attitudes and forces emerging in the period from the end of World War I to the onset of the Depression, c. 1930, is an important but academically neglected milieu in American literature. Strangely, literary historians and anthologists have almost completely ignored the artists and intellectuals who at that time envigorated black people with the concept of a "New Negro." Recognizing that the Harlem Renaissance (hereafter, HR) is a very controversial collocation of cultural and aesthetic phenomena which can at best be only skeletally sketched in this short piece, I wish nevertheless to present the "gist" of a course I offered recently at UCR and hopefully evoke an interest in others. I will pretty much restrict myself to naming works assigned, briefly offering a rationale and indicating other directions

1

to be taken. At the start, I wish to thank guest speakers who gave my course a wider context — Professors Alan Green (History) and William Holland (Black Studies and Political Science), Mr. Charles White (famous painter), and Wilfred Samuels, a student in the class who presented a paper on Marcus Garvey.

First, one has to be concerned with historical background for the period from Reconstruction to the end of World War I, during which time important changes in America strongly affected black people, particularly the migrations to northern urban and industrial centers. Having decided on major points to be stressed, I chose three key figures to introduce the germinal intellectual and political concepts which initially vitalized the HR: Alain Locke, W. E. B. DuBois, and Marcus Garvey. Selecting texts, I relied almost exclusively on paperback editions. Our first volume was Alain Locke's *The New Negro* (1925), a collection of poetry, essays, and drawings. This facsimile edition reproduces the art work done for the original volume by the Austrian artist, Winold Reiss. It introduces issues and perspectives to be examined in the other works assigned in the course. Among recommended readings was Meyer Weinberg's *W. E. B. DuBois: A Reader*. Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association and his pioneering contributions to Negro Nationalist efforts were introduced in a single lecture.

Other background works can be used, depending on the level of the course (i.e., lower-division, upper-division, or graduate). If one had time, it would be valuable to discuss *The New Negro* in relation to a Howard University symposium, *The New Negro Thirty Years Afterward* (1955), and, among many studies of the period, Henry May's *The Discontent of the Intellectuals: A Problem of the Twenties* (1963). Two works by James Weldon Johnson, a complete "Renaissance" man, can be thought of as anticipatory and historically "scenic" — *The Autobiography of An Ex-Coloured Man* (1912) and *Black Manhattan* (1930). Langston Hughes and Milton Melzer produced a marvelous pictorial record of the theatrical world of the HR, *Black Magic* (1967), which was circulated in the class. One vital aspect of the HR was the close association of black and white artists, of black artists and white patrons. This should be explored. Carl Van Vechten's novel *Nigger Heaven* (1926) evolved out of this interracial ambience. In this regard, one might consider, *en passant*, another white writer of significance. I suggest Waldo Frank, a close friend of Jean Tommer whose experimental *Cane* (1923) was a high point in the course.

Of the many HR writers whose works are now becoming available, I consider two of special importance — Claude McKay and Langston Hughes. Both worked in several genres and in diverse ways exemplify the

complexity, even the international quality, of the HR. McKay came from the West Indies and Hughes from the American Mid-West. We read McKay's *Home to Harlem* (1927) and *Banjo* (1929), providing a wide spectrum of image, mood, and idea, from "primitivism" and cabaret life in Harlem to alienation and disillusionment among expatriates in Europe. For excellent autobiographical records, we considered Hughes' *The Big Sea* (1940) and McKay's *A Long Way from Home* (1937). Hughes' second autobiographical work, *I Wonder as I Wander* (1956), is also available. Such writings provide a solid base for the student who wishes to see the HR in terms of our present-day black writers. The real significance of Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, Malcolm X, Eldridge Cleaver, and LeRoi Jones cannot be grasped without a grounding in the polarizations of the HR, both in aesthetics and in politics.

Although music and the visual arts are central to a full understanding of the HR, one must compromise with time and his own limitations. Depending on the instructor's background, the course should lend itself to very different emphases. Turning to poetry, I provided a volume that bloomed directly out of the times, James Weldon Johnson's *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (1922). Among the important poets anthologized are Dunbar, Braithwaite, J. W. Johnson, Fenton Johnson, McKay, Fauset, Cullen, Hughes, and Bontemps. Supplementary poems can be provided by dittoing. Of HR women writers, three demand special mention: Jessie Redmond Fauset, Nella Larsen, and Zora Neale Hurston. Each probed deeply into black life and produced novels of genuine imaginative power. I decided on Hurston's *Mules and Men* (1935), subtitled "Negro Folktales and Voodoo Practices in the South." Hurston's professional folklorist training is clearly demonstrated in this collection. Two of Nella Larsen's novels are now available in paperback: *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929). Jessie Fauset, poet and editor of *The Crisis* for several years, wrote significant novels, including *There is Confusion* (1924), *Plum Bun* (1928), and *The Chinaberry Tree* (1931). Hopefully, the works of Rudolph Fisher will soon reappear, especially *The Walls of Jericho* (1928) — the walls did indeed come tumbling down — and *The Conjure Man Dies* (1932). Incidentally, Fisher's short stories might be more important for beginning students of the HR.

A key poet-novelist, still vitally involved in American artistic life, is Arna Bontemps. His publications are numerous and varied, but I stress here two novels based on slave insurrections: *Black Thunder* (1936) and *Drums at Dusk* (1939). Although one notes the dates are later than the HR proper, we must realize that the novels were generated in that time and reflect vital concerns of the New Negro. They convey symbolically, and from authentic historical grounds, the New Negro's sense of black

identity and passion for freedom. I assigned the first novel, dealing with the 1800 slave revolt in Virginia, led by Gabriel Prosser. A more expanded course might allow a corollary study of William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967), caustically criticized by black critics. So far, then, I hope to have suggested a range of modes and subjects which another instructor may wish to parallel by different selections. One should always stress the "relevance" of the first HR to the Renaissance of the 1950's and 1960's. A writer like Bontemps certainly bridges both milieux.

Finally, I suppose, one should read some negative reactions to the HR, and here perhaps the writings of George Schuyler and Wallace Thurman will serve. I chose Thurman's *The Blacker the Berry* (1929) for assignment, discussing also Schuyler's *Black No More* (1931) for contrast. Thurman's book dramatizes, at times with exaggeration, the subtle and cruel color prejudices (ironic use of "differentiation" theme) in the black community. Schuyler's book satirizes specific HR figures and fantasizes upon a black doctor's discovery of an electro-chemical process for transforming blacks into pure-white "Nordics." Schuyler, associated with *The Crisis* and author of *Slaves Today* (1931), earlier attacked HR assumptions in "The Negro-Art Hokum," *The Nation,* CXXII (June 23, 1926). An important satirical work by Thurman is *Infants of the Spring* (1932). Therman B. O'Daniel alludes to the book in his introduction to *The Blacker the Berry: Infants of the Spring,* with its title taken from a line in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* — 'The canker galls the infants of the spring (I, iii, 39) / Too oft before the buttons be disclos'd' — was a bitter attack upon the bohemian tendencies ('the canker') in the ('infant') literati of the (springtime) Harlem Renaissance . . ." In fact, one black critic scornfully alluded to black middle-class and intellectual figures of the HR as the "Niggerati."

And thus one achieves one view of the HR, and gains a limited perspective into black artistry and cultural aspiration. The student will learn that Langston Huges was being in part ironic in *The Big Sea* when he wrote: "I was there. I had a swell time while it lasted. But I thought it wouldn't last long. (I remember the vogue for things Russian, the season the Chauve-Souris first came to town.) For how could a large and enthusiastic number of people be crazy about Negroes forever? But some Harlemites thought the millennium had come. They thought the race problem had at last been solved through Art plus Gladys Bentley. They were sure the New Negro would lead a new life from then on in green pastures of tolerance created by Countee Cullen, Ethel Waters, Claude McKay, Duke Ellington, Bojangles, and Alain Locke." Sadly, the New Negro Move-

ment seemed to fizzle out in 1929, mainly for economic reasons. Many things ended there.

But reverberations were to issue from that epicenter for a long time to come. Issues excitedly debated then have become even more vital today. Hardly a single problem, æsthetic or cultural, that is vital now but had its originating impetus during the HR. Therefore, I consider courses in all aspects of the HR of immediate and historical value to both black and white students. Much work is to be done. For example, I know of no substantial bibliography of the period — encompassing painting, music, poetry, theater, fiction, or politics — available to teachers and students. One of my graduate students, Michael Sechrest, however, has just completed a first-draft of such a reference guide and hopes to have it published soon. Thinking of how to place the HR in the continuum of American art and culture, we realize the need of multi-racial, multi-discipline, "variegated," approaches. Perhaps a journal, or at least a newsletter, is needed to stimulate teaching and research in the Harlem Renaissance?

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